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THE KEY CONTENT OF CONTEMPORARY ZOROASTRIAN IDENTITY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN: A SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

SUMMARY

In this article the author pays attention to the concept of contemporary Zoroastrian collective identity that is constructed by the social leaders of the community in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The reflection on the identity of the Zoroastrian religious minority in contemporary Iran is based on the author's field research conducted in Tehran in 2008. The analysis is based both on ethnographic interviews and on Zoroastrian publications. Firstly, the author briefly comments on the theory of collective identity used in the analysis, then introduces the Zoroastrian community of Tehran. The main part of the article is focused on the issue of collective identity construction among the contemporary Zoroastrians as a minority group and the key elements of their identity.

INTRODUCTION

This reflection on the contemporary identity of the Zoroastrian religious minority of Iran is based on the analysis of both ethnographic interviews and contemporary Zoroastrian publications, collected during field research in Tehran in 2008. Collective identity, as it is understood in this analysis, is not naturally generated but socially constructed. Boundaries between 'us' and 'them', and social collectivities require the construction of equality among the insiders, based on values, symbols and recollections. This takes place in several types of situations, in different rituals and ceremonies, and through

various agencies of socialisation, educational institutions, mass media or religious preaching. These situations are crucial for the attachment of members of a collectivity to its symbols and boundaries. The construction of collective identities is effected by various social actors, particularly by social leaders and elites in interactions with broader social sectors of the community. When the leaders' ideas find resonance among them, they are able to institutionalise the distinct symbols and crystallise the boundaries between the community and outsiders, and collective identities (Eisenstadt 2009, pp. 140–142; Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, p. 74).

Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Bernhard Giesen recognise three major codes (schemata or themes) of the construction of collective identity (1995, pp. 74–84). These are codes of 'primordiality', 'civility' and 'sacredness.' They are seen as ideal types because in reality the coding is complex and usually involves elements of different codes. The primordial code promotes distinction based on 'nature' and draws on original categories perceived as objective and unchangeable as gender, kinship, ethnicity or race. In the civic code, the collectivity is based on the familiarity of social routines, traditions, and rules governing the participation in everyday life. According to the sacred code, the identity is based on the particular relation of its subject (the group) to the sacred that may be understood as God, Reason or Rationality. As my analysis based on the example of Tehran community demonstrates, in the construct of contemporary Zoroastrian collective identity all of the three aforementioned codes and elements can be traced.

ZOROASTRIAN COMMUNITY OF TEHRAN

In contemporary Iran, Zoroastrians reside mostly in urbanised areas of Tehran as well as Yazd and Kerman provinces. After the majority of Iran's population had converted to the Islamic religion, Zoroastrians grouped themselves in Yazd and Kerman, 'finding here the last bastions where they could hold out, in poverty and protective obscurity' (Boyce 2003, p. 162). The Zoroastrian community of Tehran, where the majority of them presently live, is relatively new. In the 1850's there were about 50 Zoroastrian merchants in the capital of Iran. By the turn of the twentieth century the community consisted of less than 330 individuals, primarily merchants and gardeners working on the land of the Shah. The Tehran Zoroastrian Council (*Anǧoman-e Mobedān-e Tehrān*)

was established during the Constitutional Revolution in 1907, but according to the population census in 1912 there were only 500 Zoroastrians residing in the capital city (Kestenberg Amighi 1990, pp. 147–149). In the course of time, more and more Zoroastrians would migrate to Tehran seeking economic and other opportunities offered by the capital city. Over 1956 there were almost 5,000 Zoroastrian residents in Tehran and their number grew to approximately 12,500 by 1974. Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, there were different Zoroastrian organisations, clubs, schools and other institutions (for example a clinic, a library and publishing houses) in the capital city (Kestenberg Amighi 1990, p. 213). Many of them still operate today.

Nowadays the population of Zoroastrians in the whole country is estimated at around 22,500–30,000[1] (Niknām 1386/2007, p. 35). Around half of the Zoroastrians of Iran live in Tehran. They share the status of a recognised religious minority (*aqalliyat-e dini*) and have the right to elect a representative to the Iranian Parliament. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran gives this official status to three religious communities: Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians.

The reality in Iran after the Islamic Revolution brought new challenges for the Zoroastrians. As other non-Muslim citizens, they had to find their own place within the social structure of the religious state of the Islamic Republic of Iran dominated by Shia Muslims. After the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, a sharper distinction between 'us'-Muslims and 'them'-non-Muslims developed in the social life of Iranian citizens (Sanasarian 2000, p. 73). As Eliz Sanasarian remarks, 'the official segmentation and public stereotyping of the recognized religious minorities reinforced their own sense of solidarity and identity. The sense of 'we' (Muslims) versus 'them' (non-Muslims) intensified the minority sense of cohesion and self-pride' (2000, p. 147). This process influenced the existence of marginalised religious minorities, their ways of life and their perception of their own cultural heritage. After the Islamic Revolution, the Zoroastrian youth showed an increased interest in their religion both in terms of moral values and the priesthood as a profession (Bekhradnia 1992, p. 42). All of these phenomena are reflected in the Zoroastrian collective identity.

The leaders of the Zoroastrian community in Tehran, that is to say the people who influence the process of collective identity formation, are both priests (*mobedān*) and secular intellectuals, some of whom having connections to Zoroastrian public institutions. The most popular official institutions involved in

[1] Current Iran's population is estimated over 78 million (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html).

the process of spreading and institutionalising the idea of Zoroastrian identity based on commonly shared symbols, are the councils (*anǧomanhā*) located in areas inhabited by Zoroastrians. For the aforementioned process of collective identity construction to take place, the sociopolitical context of a Muslim country is crucial. Any kind of promotion of the minority religion outside the community of believers is forbidden, and there is no way to create converts. Many aspects of both the religious and everyday life of religious minorities are subject to control by government institutions.

ZOROASTRIAN COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

In the content of the Zoroastrian collective identity promoted by the social leaders of the community, we can trace the two most popular identifications of the group – us-Zoroastrians and us-Iranians. The concept of us-Zoroastrians (*zartoštiyān* or *behdinān*) is based mostly on the sacral and primordial codes. Zoroastrian leaders introduce the sacral elements of the identity content, such as common beliefs that distinguish the group from others, the philosophy that, according to tradition, was created by the prophet Zoroaster in ancient times, and the universal moral values of *good thoughts*, *good words* and *good deeds* (*pendār-e nik*, *goftār-e nik*, *kerdār-e nik*). The identity is reproduced and communicated through religious rituals or emblems. The emblems (for example religious symbols or Zoroaster's picture that are used for marking the Zoroastrian public space) do not reveal the secret of community relations with the sacred, but make the relations visible for outsiders and uphold social boundaries. Moreover, the religious ceremonies are a mixture of meetings, competitions and celebrations that serve the purpose of socialisation and strengthening ties among group members. Social leaders tend to keep shared events attractive even for the people who are not deeply religious, but belong to the community because they were born in Zoroastrian families and brought up in the Zoroastrian tradition. For them a kind of 'symbolic religiosity' is created: 'the consumption of religious symbols in such a way as to create no complications or barriers for dominant secular lifestyles' (Gans 1994, p. 585). The main aim is to maintain the distinctiveness of the Zoroastrian community within Iranian society and not to become assimilated.

Usually the main mechanism that protects and upholds collective identity based on a sacral code is the mechanism of cultural stratification. After complex rituals of initiation and education, the group of the chosen share the most sacred secrets and protect the core from profanisation (Giesen 1998, pp. 36–37). In the Zoroastrian collective identity, this aspect has recently been weakened. The Zoroastrian community has observed the undermining of the authority of contemporary religious leaders. The generation of great priests and the position of *mobed-e mobedān* have vanished, as well as the complex training required to become the priest. Because of the lack of interest among men born in priestly families, both women and men of no priestly origin are accepted to fulfil some of *mobed*'s duties.

This weakness of some of the sacral elements in the Zoroastrian identity is compensated by the elements created in the frame of primordial and civic codes. Primordial content stressed by the Zoroastrian leaders mainly consists of common origin, ethnic history and the tradition transmitted by the forefathers of the Zoroastrians. The prohibition of apostasy from Islam and of the promotion of other religions, incorporated into the legal system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, supports the idea of being born as a Zoroastrian (*zartošti-zāde*). Although Zoroastrians are not of a different ethnic origin to that of most Iranian citizens, the centuries of isolation led them to believe that being a Zoroastrian for generations was some kind of new value. Another element important in the frame of the primordial code is the Dari language (*dari-ye zartošti*), traditionally spoken by Zoroastrians in the Yazd and Kerman regions. This language was neglected by many Zoroastrians during the 20th century, but nowadays some have rediscovered an interest in it while searching for their identity and some of the leaders support it as a common value and a symbol of Zoroastrian purity.

At the same time, Zoroastrian leaders try to undermine the Zoroastrians' status as a religious minority in Iranian society and to build an identification of us-Iranians. The basic content of this identification is shaped by a civil code. The main class of elements used for constructing the identity of Iranians has developed in the inspiration of ancient Persian history. It is the part of Zoroastrian symbolical culture common both for Iranian Zoroastrians and Iranian Muslims. It stresses a common motherland (*vatan*) and a joint heritage, and the origin of the Iranians regardless of religion. The most popular elements promoted by Zoroastrian leaders from this perspective are: culture (*farhang*) and civilisation (*tamaddon*). Directly after the Islamic Revolution, the unique link of the Zoroastrians to Iranian culture was officially stressed by one of the Zoroastrian leaders, *mobed* Rostam Šahzādi, a deputy representing the minority in the Assembly of

Experts (*Mağles-e Xobregān*) deliberating on the project of a new Iranian constitution. In his first speech during the discussion over the article of the document considering the status of religious minorities (no. 13) he explained that many Zoroastrians in Iran would not like to be considered as a minority because of their particular connection with the Iranian land and people. He emphasised that Zoroastrians and Iranian Muslims were the same people sharing the same traditions, although after the conversion of most Iranians to Islam the name of their God and prophet had changed (Sanasarian 2000, p. 67).

This idea is still alive today, over 30 years after the Islamic Revolution. In some points, the idea is close to the concept of Iranian national identity developed during the time of the Pahlavis (1925–1979). History and language were two important bases for the formation of the new 'state nationalism.' An emphasis was put on the pre-Islamic Iran and the Achaemenid era. The idea of geo-political Achaemenid Iran and the empire of the Aryans were adopted as the formal ideological framework of the Pahlavi state. The stress was put on the 25 centuries of the Persian Empire as the main pillar of Iranian identity (Ashraf 2006, pp. 526–527). Nowadays many of the aforementioned elements can be found in the content of Zoroastrian collective identity, but the main difference seems to be neglecting the discrimination of non-Persian communities that was one of the characteristics of 'an aggressive Fars-centric nationalism' (Asgharzadeh 2007, p. 152) developed by Rezā Pahlavi. The idea of Aryans is still alive, but Zoroastrian leaders first of all stress a common Iranian civilisation that includes many cultures of different origin.

In this civic frame of collective identity, the Zoroastrians perceive themselves as the protectors and inheritors of Iranian tradition. As one contemporary Zoroastrian intellectual remarks, 'Zoroastrians should be perceived as guardians of old Iranian traditional rites of this land' (Mazdāpur 1382/2003, pp. 8–9). Moreover, in Zoroastrian identity discourse, the idea of a broad Iranian community is sometimes stressed by using a sacral theme. Paradoxically, as a non-Muslim community, the Zoroastrians use the religious concept of monotheism (*yektāparasti*) to undermine the boundaries between themselves and Muslim Iranians. Zoroastrian leaders tend to show that the Iranian nation is monotheistic today and has been monotheistic for ages. It seems to be a strategy important for negotiating the place of Zoroastrian religion in an Islam-dominated confessional state that does not accept nonmonotheistic religions.

CONCLUSIONS

This short analysis of identity content presented above demonstrates that contemporary Zoroastrian collective identity is not homogenous and includes the variety of elements shaped by three codes of distinction that are interlinked. The relation among them is complex and dynamic, and the process of collective identity construction is inseparable from the political and social context. In the reality of confessional Islamic country, the intellectual leaders of marginalised groups, for example religious authorities, teachers or journalists, make efforts to preserve the religion and culture of their communities and not to assume the identity of the dominant Muslim community. At the same time, as representatives of the religious minority of Iranian origin, Zoroastrian leaders try to legitimise the place of their community in Iranian society looking for the elements common both for them and the dominant group of Muslim Iranians and to prove that they are rightful members of the Iranian society.

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